



By Bob Keefe and Mark Davis  
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The house was haunted; everyone knew that. A shadowy figure peered from an upstairs window. Screams rent the night. There was that vanishing dog, too.

Young Jimmy, like everyone else in Plains, avoided the creaky old structure just outside of town.

Now, the house that so frightened the boy who'd become president could become a tourist destination.

Legislation making its way through Congress would turn the Jimmy Carter National Historic Site into a full-fledged park owned and operated by the National Park Service. It would expand the historic inventory of structures here, pumping new life and new money into the hometown of the only president from Georgia.

The structures that would be included are the old house, which Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter lived in years later, after his return from the U.S. Navy; brother Billy Carter's gas station; and the state's Visitor Information Center on the outskirts of town.

"This legislation would help complete the story of President Carter's life," said site superintendent Gary Ingram. His National Park Service office is in the old Plains High School, a handsome building whose hardwood floors squeak. "What excites me is being able to tell the full story."

It's a story worth telling, agree folks in Plains. With a population of 635, it's a small place with a huge welcome mat: 80,000 people visit annually to get a glimpse into the life of the 39th president, the nation's chief executive from 1977 to 1981. The historic site opened in 1987.

"I'm all for" expanding the site, said George Williams, whose family operates a warehouse here. "Preserving history is a good thing."

Full of flags, agents

Plains is like many southwest Georgia towns. It is a cluster of sun-bleached buildings, split by a railroad track. Flat fields unfold under clouds that pile up like tossed pillows. Tractors share the road with pickups and log trucks.

But the buildings here are festooned with American flags. Merchants sell souvenirs that range from peanut Christmas ornaments to empty cans of Billy Beer, the brew Carter's thirsty brother made famous. Secret Service agents keep nonstop watch on the Carter house, hidden behind a wrought-iron fence dotted with wild roses.

Bobby Salter, who owns the Plains Peanuts Store, hopes the site becomes a park.

"It'll help tourism," said Salter. "That's the name of the game here."

The proposal is not just about selling lapel buttons or bumper stickers, federal officials say.

Under legislation sponsored by U.S. Rep. Sanford Bishop, the Democrat whose district includes Plains, and Republican U.S. Sen. Saxby Chambliss, the National Park Service would take ownership of the "haunted house," reputed to be the oldest home in Sumter County. It also would take over ownership of brother Billy's service station from a local preservation group. The state center and 17 adjacent acres would become federal property, too.

They'd join structures that already comprise the historic site: the old high school; the former train depot where Carter launched his presidential campaign; and the family farm, where visitors can still pick peanuts.

Plans call for the old house's renovation, and the construction of a campground on the visitor center land. All the buildings could get hundreds of thousands of dollars for improvements and repairs. The legislation does not request a specific sum for improvements or hiring extra employees.

For now, the historic site has an operating budget of about \$1.5 million and employs 23 people.

"President and Mrs. Carter are part of it all," said state Rep. Mike Cheokas (D-Americus), who went to Washington this month to ask Congress to pass the legislation.

The Carters were traveling and could not be reached for comment, according to a spokeswoman.

An exclusive club

The proposed park would put Carter in rarefied company: The homes of only three other presidents — Lyndon Johnson and the Adamses, John and John Quincy — are designated as national historical parks. It would join 123 historical parks that include national icons Valley Forge, Jamestown, Yosemite and other must-see spots.

The Sumter County site also would become the only national historical park in the country that's

home to a living president.

The former president and his wife often show up to greet visitors touring the homestead or attending their home church, Maranatha Baptist. On July Fourth, they wave to passers-by from the balcony of the Plains Historic Inn.

“They’re so nice,” said Plains resident Jan Williams. “People are just blown away that Jimmy Carter still lives here.”

Williams sat by a computer at a downtown antique shop, waiting for customers. Outside, a guy with a camera walked by, looking for a president.